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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine which method for vocabulary instruction was most beneficial: learning words through the context of literature and reading or through isolated word lists. Subjects, 45 high school students taking Freshman English, were divided into 2 groups. All students were studying Charles Dickens' novel "Great Expectations." The first group consisted of 22 students and they used isolated word lists. The second group of 23 students learned their words while reading. Both groups were given a pre- and posttest. The results showed no significant difference in the mean gains of both samples. Rather, both methods of vocabulary instruction produced gains in vocabulary. (Contains 24 references and 2 tables of data; an appendix contains a vocabulary test.) (Author/RS)

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TEACHING VOCABULARY: WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF LITERATURE AND READING OR THROUGH ISOLATED WORD LISTS

By

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine which method for vocabulary instruction was most beneficial: learning words through the context of literature and reading or through isolated word lists. Forty-five students taking Freshman English were divided into two groups. All students were studying Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*. The first group consisted of twenty-two students and they used isolated word lists. The second group of twenty-three students learned their words while reading. Both groups were given a pre and post test. The results showed no significant difference in the mean gains of both samples. Rather, both methods of vocabulary instruction produce gains in vocabulary.

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Educators agree that the acquisition of a vast vocabulary is important for comprehension and communication. Anderson and Freebody (1981) state that a strong correlation exists between vocabulary and academic achievement. If this is true then it follows that teaching a lot of vocabulary words is an important part of a reading lesson (Gauthier, 1991). However, researchers and teachers do not agree on what is the most effective way to teach vocabulary to students. According to Klesius and Searls (1991), vocabulary instruction involves both direct and indirect instruction. With direct instruction, the teacher explicitly presents information to the students. On the other hand, "with indirect instruction the teacher orchestrates various aspects of the classroom environment in ways that lead students to specific outcomes" (Klesius & Searls, 1991, p. 165). One effective method of teaching vocabulary, which involves both direct and indirect instruction, occurs within the context of literature and reading (Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995).

Knowing what a word means is a strong predictor of how well a student will do on reading comprehension tasks and, generally, in school (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Thus, it is not surprising that several guidelines have been introduced to be used during vocabulary instruction (Klesius & Searls, 1991). First, teachers should relate words to students' prior knowledge. The best way to activate prior knowledge, according to Susan M. Watts (1995), is through discussion. However, the "verbal interaction surrounding the word" should be one of "sufficient length and student involvement" (Watts, 1995, p. 407).

Another guideline for effective vocabulary instruction is to provide frequent encounters

with the words being taught (Watts, 1995). Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) report that when students are exposed to the same words many times and in different contexts, the result is a higher degree of learning, an increased ability to remember the word, and a better chance of the word becoming automatic. Klesius and Searls (1991) believe that "automatic association of meanings with words is as important as automatic pronunciation of words since either requires attention required for comprehension" (p. 69).

Yet a third characteristic of effective vocabulary instruction is to provide a variety of ways for students to work with words (Gauthier, 1991). Students should be engaged in activities where they see the words being used, specifically in context. For example, while reading a story the teacher may offer simple definitions of words which is an effective and practical method for teaching vocabulary according to Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley (1996). Often vocabulary instruction involves only drill activities like completing a vocabulary workbook page. Completing drill exercises in vocabulary can be useful, however, it will by no means cause students to learn vocabulary if this method is the only one used (Gauthier, 1991).

A final guideline for instructors to teach vocabulary is to provide students with strategies for learning word meanings. Students should be able to independently decipher a word's meaning. However, the teacher must first show the students a strategy which illustrates how to do this (Watts, 1995). Because students' learning of vocabulary does not automatically result in improved text comprehension, strategies should be taught to the

students (Beck & McKeown, 1991). To figure out the meanings of unknown words on their own, students should have both procedural and conditional knowledge about words (Dole et al., 1995). Procedural knowledge about words refers to "knowing how" to use key words in a sentence in order to understand an unknown word (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Conditional knowledge about words refers to students "knowing why" they are learning certain words and hoe these words are important to their context (what they are reading in class) (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Research indicates that students benefit from knowing procedural and conditional knowledge about words (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985).

Taking into consideration these characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction, several researchers have concluded that teaching vocabulary within the context of literature and reading is especially beneficial (Dole et al., 1995). Nagy and Anderson (1984) said that teaching vocabulary strategies during reading is justifiable if the strategies can be applied to words not taught in class. Students should be able to apply the strategies to unknown words they encounter in their daily lives, outside of school. They further state that reading a lot and often will enable the students to learn a greater number of words that could ever be taught through mere direct vocabulary instruction. Thus, Gauthier (1991) believes that vocabulary words should be targeted and taught "by way of a contextual setting which was interesting and highly meaningful" (p.200). Reading to students or having students read allows for an exposure to new words and, consequently, increases vocabulary (Elley, 1989). Klesius and

Searls (1991) conclude that while reading is taking place in a classroom, teachers can stop when a new word is encountered to explain its meaning. A discussion could occur, as well as predictions made by students. Lastly, Klesius and Searls (1991) further state that teachers can help students learn these new words gained during reading by creating a "word wall" (p.166). Then students should engage in extended activities such as writing activities. Thus, teaching vocabulary within the context of literature and reading becomes an effective way to teach vocabulary.

HYPOTHESIS

To add to this body of research and opinion, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that students who are introduced to new words within the context of literature and reading will demonstrate a stronger knowledge of these words when compared to a sample taught using isolated word lists.

PROCEDURES

The subjects involved in this study were forty-five ninth grade students from Union High School in Union, New Jersey. These students were divided into two classes; they were studying the same subject matter with the same teacher. The two classes were heterogeneously mixed. In the first class, there were twenty-two students of which nine are boys. Also, in this class there were five students who are sophomores and one student who is a junior. They failed Freshman English the first time they took it and are repeating it now. In the second class, there were twenty-three students of which ten are boys. In this class, there were two sophomores and one junior who were taking the class because they failed it the first time. Both classes meet in the

afternoon for a forty-seven minute period.

Part of the ninth grade curriculum is to read Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. An abridged version of the novel appears in the students' textbooks. The novel is divided into three stages with a total of forty-four chapters. For each chapter there are a set of vocabulary words that the students are expected to learn. The amount of vocabulary words vary according to each chapter, but the average amount of words per chapter are ten.

First, students in both classes were given a vocabulary pre-test. This test was given prior to the reading of Stage Two of Great Expectations. The results were calculated. Following, two different forms of instruction were given to the two different classes. The first class (Class A) learned the words through isolated word lists. They were given a list of vocabulary words for each chapter and then instructed to look up the words in the dictionary for homework. On the following day, the words and definitions were reviewed and the students had the opportunity to share their definitions and ask questions. While reading the novel, no attention was given to the vocabulary words as they appeared in context.

The second class (Class B) was responsible for the same vocabulary words, however, they did not have to look them up in the dictionary prior to reading. Rather, as we read the novel in class when a vocabulary word was encountered we stopped to examine it within the context of literature. The students were instructed to write the word in their notebooks as well as the sentence that it appeared in. Following, the class discussed the meaning of the words based on the context of the literature. We constructed a definition together which was then written in their notebooks.

This process continued while reading Stage Two of the novel. Students in each class were given five vocabulary quizzes to assess their knowledge of the vocabulary. At the end of Stage Two, a comprehension test was given which included a vocabulary section.. All the students in both classes had encountered the words in one of the two ways described above. After one week had passed, the students were given a vocabulary post-test which was exactly the same as the pre-test. Results were calculated and evaluated.

RESULTS

Mean scores were compared using t-tests to determine the significance of the difference if any between Group A and Group B. Group A learned the words through isolated word lists. Group B learned the words within the context of literature. The results of this study, as seen in Table I, indicated that the two samples were essentially alike at the outset of study.

TABLE I

PRETEST SCORES OF SAMPLES

SAMPLE	M	SD	t
GROUP A	37.82	13.73	-0.84
GROUP B	41.33	14.62	

The t of -0.84 was not significant.

Table II shows the results of the posttest for the two samples. The results of this analysis, as seen in Table II, indicated the t that is significant at the 16% level, but that is not a significant

TABLE II

POSTTEST SCORES OF SAMPLES

SAMPLE	M	SD	t
GROUP A	65.33	26.68	-1.43
GROUP B	75.50	22.48	

difference for an educational experiment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study reject the hypothesis that students who are introduced to new words within the context of literature and reading demonstrate a stronger knowledge of these words. It appears that either technique, vocabulary instruction within the context of literature or through isolated word lists, produces gains in vocabulary. Group A, which was the definition only group, showed a 38 point gain and Group B, which was the context group, showed a 34 point gain. Furthermore, it appears that Group A, which started at a lower end, made a greater gain. However, the results were not statistically significant. The trend seems to be in favor of the definition only group (Group A).

Even though the hypothesis was rejected and other research in vocabulary instruction is not supported, an important implication in education can be made. There is no one, simple way to teach vocabulary. Perhaps, a combination of techniques would prove most beneficial to the students.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION: RELATED RESEARCH

Observations made by Blackowicz (1987) reveal that an estimated 15 - 20% of instructional time spent on reading is primarily devoted to the teaching of new vocabulary. Teachers share the view that vocabulary instruction is an important part in a lesson, however, many teachers are unsure as to the most effective way to teach vocabulary. Hence, much research has been done in an effort to find the most effective methods of vocabulary instruction. One effective way to teach vocabulary is within th context of literature. However, research indicates that vocabulary cannot merely be learned within the context of literature or reading if several factors are not first met. First, the students must read a lot and the word to be learned must appear several times in the text (Hoffman, 1980). Second, there should be clues within the text that help students decipher the unknown words and, third, there should be an even amount of conceptually difficult words (Graves, 1986). Lastly, according to Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), simple narratives are more effective for vocabulary learning than expository writing. Direct instruction is needed and highly beneficial rather than relying on incidental learning of a certain vocabulary. What is especially effective is reading subject matter with a specialized vocabulary. For example, reading a deep sea adventure story where water pressure and technical equipment are part of the vocabulary allows students to learn words that they might not come into contact otherwise (McKeown et al., 1985).

Because vocabulary instruction is so important and the question of how to best teach it exists, Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995) conducted research on teaching vocabulary within the context of literature or reading. When students are directly involved in finding out the

meaning of words, as opposed to looking up words in a dictionary, students' vocabulary acquisition is more effective (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982). For years, Sloan, an English teacher at Judge Memorial Catholic School in Salt Lake City, believed that looking up difficult words before students read a selection was an adequate way to teach vocabulary. However, through observation, Dole, Sloan and Trathen (1995) saw that students were rarely making the connection between the vocabulary words studied and the actual reading selection. Thus, they began their research which corroborated Beck and McKeown's (1991) finding that students do not necessarily comprehend text better if they learn a set of vocabulary words first. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) believe that looking up words in a dictionary, which is a common way of teaching vocabulary, results in a superficial understanding of the words which does not help students understand their text or reading selection. What is needed is a "thorough and deep understanding of words to improve their reading comprehension" (Dole et al., 1995, p. 453).

Since a thorough study of words is needed, researchers concentrate on the guidelines believed to be effective during vocabulary instruction. Of particular interest is teaching students specific strategies to use when figuring out an unknown word which relates to procedural and conditional knowledge about words (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Thus, Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995) used this concept to expand students' word bank. They reasoned that when students learn procedural knowledge about how to select particular key words in a literature selection, and conditional knowledge about why those words are important then

their learning of those words will have an impact on their understanding of the selections they read. (pp. 453-54)

Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995) then applied their research by developing an alternative method for teaching vocabulary. It was not the typical method where students look up words in a dictionary before beginning to read text. The alternative method was in keeping with the characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction. The procedure consisted of several steps. First, Sloan wanted his students to select important words from a selection. He modeled the approach to them, and he also explained what an "important word" was. An important word is a word that is used in the reading selection, and must be used to describe something relevant (a character, theme, important event) from the selection.

Following this, the students were asked to read the selection, underline the important words, and predict the words' meanings from the context of the story. A discussion of the words followed as they directly tied into the plot, theme, and characters of the story (Dole et al., 1995). Watts (1995) states that a teacher must be explicit in teaching the students a strategy, and that is what Sloan and his fellow researchers intended to do. Sloan wanted students to internalize the vocabulary selection process and to understand the relationship between their study of important vocabulary words and their improved comprehension of the story. (Dole et al., 1995, p. 456).

Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995) also studied the effectiveness of their alternative model. In order to do this, they had established a traditional group where Sloan taught

vocabulary using the traditional method of looking up words. They also set up an alternative group of students who were learning the meanings of new words within the context of literature. They found that students in the alternative group were more confident in their knowledge of the important vocabulary words than the students in the traditional group. On a vocabulary posttest, the alternative group also did much better than the traditional group. The traditional group did not connect the words with the stories they read whereas the alternative group used story information in their sentences. Lastly, the alternative group had higher scores on their comprehension (of the reading selection) tests. Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995) add, "Thus, students who received alternative instruction improved their comprehension of the selections more than students who received vocabulary instruction" (p. 459).

Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley (1996) conducted a study similar to Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (1995). They concluded that students who listened to two stories along with a brief explanation of target words learned significantly more new words and remembered them better six weeks later than students who heard stories with no explanation of the words. (Brett et al., 1996, p. 435)

Studies by Elley (1989) also have similar findings: repeated reading aloud of stories with explanations of word meanings more than doubled vocabulary gains students made without such explanations. Elley conducted two experiments from which she concluded that a great amount of words students learn is from reading. Students with a limited vocabulary

who begin reading can gain at least as much in vocabulary as other students with larger vocabularies. Furthermore, the learning that is accomplished is relatively permanent. Of course, she adds that there are certain factors that increase the students' chances of learning new words: how often the word appears in the story, the usefulness of the context clues, and the use of pictures or graphs that illustrate the word being studied. Consequently, the more times a word appears in text or in the illustrations, the higher the chance the students will learn and understand the vocabulary word. However, Elley's key point is that teachers must offer explanations of words while reading to optimize vocabulary gains.

Teaching vocabulary within the context of literature and reading is an effective method for learning new words; however, there are some limitations (Brett et al., 1996). One such limitation that Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley (1996) make reference to is the use of trade books. Using trade books does not allow the teacher to control variables such as the number of times the target word appears in context and the level of word difficulty. Another limitation the researchers addressed was the fact that many studies did not test the students' ability to use the new words but rather tested their recall of the definition only.

Yet another study on vocabulary instruction was conducted by Judith N. Thelen (1986), a professor of education at Frostburg, Maryland, State College. She observed that vocabulary instruction is best taught or learned during reading comprehension. However, the particular reading comprehension lesson must be meaningful. Hence, Thelen went on to describe what makes reading comprehension meaningful. A particular reading selection can

be meaningful if three conditions are first met. First, the reading selection must be capable of being related by the students. They should be able to relate to the story on some level by possibly identifying with a character, setting, or conflict. Second, students should have the appropriate schema. The new vocabulary words should be taught in a way that allows students to make connections to their already existing vocabulary and concepts. Lastly, students should be intentionally involved in the learning of new vocabulary. If the students are involved and are genuinely trying to comprehend the vocabulary, it is highly probable that meaningful learning is taking place.

Duffelmeyer concluded the following based on his research in vocabulary acquisition: "...not only does context facilitate the ascertainment of word meaning, but that it does so for poor readers and good readers alike" (1984, p. 103). He conducted his study on 176 eighth grade students in a school in Midwestern U.S. After administering several tests, he found that the context means (x = 43.2, 31.3) were considerably higher than the isolation means (x = 34.4, 16.5) for both good and poor readers respectively. Thus he concluded that regardless of students' reading skills, on average, when words were presented within the context of literature students were able to understand the meaning on a much higher proportion than when the same words were presented in isolation. Specifically, the isolation mean was 26.9 (out of 45) while the context mean was 38.2. Thus, both poor and good readers benefitted from learning vocabulary within meaningful context. Furthermore, researchers like Farr and

Roser (1979) have suggested that vocabulary should be taught within some contextual manner.

McKeown (1985) also assert that learning vocabulary from context is effective. However, she does not believe it is an automatic process, but rather a learned skill, a skill that students with a smaller vocabulary especially need. Many problems can arise if students are not skilled in how to use context clues. First, students can misunderstand the relationship between the word and the context. With certain context, many various associations can be made, however, of course not all the associations will be supported by the content. Hence, a wrong conclusion as to a word's meaning is made even though context clues were examined because students cannot determine constraints. Second, students get confused when considering two contexts. "The meaning obtained from one context is carried over to the other and interferes with an accurate evaluation of the second context" (McKeown, 1985, p. 429). Last, even if students do learn the meaning of a word, from context or by being told the definition, they are not capable of using the newly learned word in subsequent sentences. Hence, McKeown suggests that what is needed is much practice in using context clues to derive word meaning. However, what is even more effective is teacher modeling how to acquire word meaning from context. This suggestion of teacher modeling was also supported by Carnine (1984).

Several researchers agree that teaching vocabulary within the context of reading is essential, yet many add that learning the definitions of words separately is also necessary. One

such researcher is Robert L. Crist (1981). After conducting his study on college students, Crist concluded that "acquiring word meaning through contexts results in a greater degree of generalization to new contexts than would obtain if subjects encountered an unfamiliar context after exposure to definitions" (1981. P. 276). Learning words through context is more effective for several reasons. First, students can perform better with new contexts because they have learned how to use context clues to help them. Second, students are able to choose the right word when they encountered different definitions they had never seen before. Crist offers his opinion for why students learn more words in context. First, placing words to be learned in context is more interesting and, hence, students pay more attention and apply more effort to the learning. Consequently, merely being exposed to definitions repeatedly can seem boring and, thus, less time or energy is expended. In addition, students who studied a word's definition only tended to learn only one definition for a particular word. This selective learning may then interfere with students' knowledge of vocabulary. Crist basically asserts that even though using context to learn vocabulary is the best mode of vocabulary instruction, he also insists on the importance of studying definitions too. Both methods can only help the acquisition of a greater vocabulary.

Most instructors teach vocabulary by presenting the students with the definition only. However, definitional information alone is not enough for learning words (Nagy, 1988). Rather, effective instruction is one that combines definitional information with other types of information, especially within the context of literature or reading (Watts, 1995). According to

Jenkins, Matlock, and Slocum (1989), combining instruction in individual meanings with that of deriving meaning from context aids the students' acquisition of vocabulary for two reasons. First, learning the definitions of words can add specific items to a student's word bank. Second, learning strategies on how to derive the meaning of words can help a student learn new words independently. Thus, these methods "do not conflict, and in fact would seem complementary" (Jenkins et al., 1989, p. 234).

Watts (1995) also observed that the teachers in her study relied mostly on the traditional method of learning new words: looking them up in a dictionary as a prereading activity. The teachers Watts (1995) studied also viewed the value of vocabulary in terms of what was going on in class, and , therefore, did not try to make the learning of new words something the students can use in their daily lives. However, a more effective means to teach vocabulary is when students learn a strategy where they come to understand the connection between learning new words and understanding the reading selection. This is achieved when the students themselves choose the important vocabulary words (Dole et al., 1995). Because the students learned the words within the context of reading, it prevented the isolated learning of words which is not effective (Watts, 1995). An added benefit with learning words as they relate to literature is that it results with a better comprehension of the story (Dole et al., 1995). Thus, if students were taught to learn the meanings of unknown words within context "they would acquire a sizable number of new words every year," more than the 3,000 words that students are estimated to learn annually (Jenkins et al., 1989, p. 218).

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APPENDIX A

***Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens**

VOCABULARY TEST - STAGE TWO

A. Match each word in column I with the correct definition in column II. Place the letter of each definition you choose in the space provided.

I.	II.
_____ 1. culminate	a. forceful
_____ 2. impetuosity	b. to become discouraged or hopeless
_____ 3. diffidence	c. dependent upon something that hasn't happened
_____ 4. thwart	d. to come to the highest degree or effect
_____ 5. animosity	e. shyness
_____ 6. habituate	f. lucky; predicting a good fortune
_____ 7. chronic	g. to get used to something
_____ 8. despond	h. extreme hatred
_____ 9. copious	i. continuing; recurring
_____ 10. edify	j. to relate to; to belong to
_____ 11. cogent	k. to teach; to enlighten
_____ 12. auspicious	l. an impulsive act
_____ 13. injudicious	m. plentiful
_____ 14. appertain	n. to frustrate; to defeat
_____ 15. contingent	o. unwise
	p. tidings

B. In the space provided, write the letter of the word taken from the list below which is closest in meaning to the italicized definition or synonym(s) in each of the following sentences.

a. reproached b. impended c. relinquished d. singularity
e. abhorrence f. reiterated

_____ 1. Miss Havisham (*blamed; criticized*) Estella for being cold.
_____ 2. The convict (*gave up*) much for Pip.
_____ 3. The convict had a (*distinctness*) of look on his face as he gazed at Pip.
_____ 4. Pip felt that Estella's marriage was an event that had (*been about to happen*) for as long as he had known her.
_____ 5. The convict (*said over and over*) that he was grateful to Pip.

C. In the space provided, write the letter of the best synonym for each word.

_____	1. fabulous	(a) unbelievable	(b) awkward	(c) gigantic	(d) well
_____	2. confound	(a) overlay	(b) confuse	(c) hate	(d) curse
_____	3. intolerable	(a) unreliable	(b) inside	(c) uncouth	(d) unreliable
_____	4. adversary	(a) poor	(b) heat	(c) friend	(d) opponent
_____	5. pettish	(a) irritable	(b) loving	(c) fancy	(d) happy